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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the story of a student's essay on her grandfather's death, this paper considers how paradox plays out in the writing classroom. The paper then suggests how what is called "ordinary writing" elucidates how writers make texts, providing students with the tools necessary to see how all writing, including their own, is made. It focuses specifically on the form and content of personal narratives for several reasons: first, the instructor/author encourages students to write personal narratives because personal writing gives students more authority to write--in the personal narrative students are more fully in charge of making both the subject and the text; and secondly, the personal narrative, traditionally undergirded by a "so what" that ties the particular into the universal and orders the story, illuminates very clearly one way in which the paradox is set in motion by a failure to make clear that the "so what" is a process of reducing possibility, the writerly process of filling in gaps. (NKA)

Assumptions We Make About the Stories Students Should Tell: Or, The Time I Told My Student Her Grandfather's Death Didn't Have a "So What".

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Assumptions We Make About the Stories Students Should Tell: Or, The Time I Told My Student Her Grandfather's Death Didn't Have a "So What"

Several years ago, I had a student in my composition course write an essay about her grandfather's death. I say several years ago, but I could just have easily said yesterday as dead grandparent essays are a staple of first year composition. What makes Hallie's essay remarkable, as a moment I continue to mark, is that it sent me hurtling into a paradox that lies at the heart of the writing classroom. The paradox goes something like this: When we ask our students to examine a professional text for assumptions, what I think we mean when we say read critically, we are asking them to name the gaps. When we ask students to produce a text, on the other hand, we are asking them to close the gaps, to present a seamless argument. We fail to illuminate either the making of the gaps or the illusory filling of them, thereby suggesting that the making and filling are born and not made. As with other paradoxes in the classroom, we ignore the contradiction, further mystifying the processes of both reading and writing.

Beginning with Hallie's story, I want to consider how that paradox plays out in the classroom. Then I will suggest how what I call ordinary writing elucidates how writers make texts, providing students with the tools necessary to see how all writing, including their own, is made and therefore partial. I will focus specifically on the form and content of personal narratives for several reasons. I encourage students to write personal narratives because I agree with what Peter Elbow said so nicely at a recent CCCC conference: personal writing gives students more authority to write. Unlike traditional forms of

academic writing where students are asked to seek authority from others, the personal narrative requires that they consider their own unique location and draw upon those experiences as evidence. What is of more interest to me here is that in the personal narrative students are more fully in charge of making both the subject and the text. They are the makers and the being made. Therefore, the personal narrative offers the perfect testing ground to experiment with such making. Secondly, the personal narrative, traditionally undergirded by a "so what" that ties the particular into the universal and orders the story, illuminates very clearly one way in which we set the paradox in motion by failing to make clear that the "so what" is a process of reducing possibility, the writerly process of filling in gaps.

To Hallie, then. Hallie called me at home one day with a question about voice in her personal narrative. Her paper was about her grandfather's death and how she regretted not spending more time with him when he was still alive. It was hard for me at first to respond. I don't know if she sensed my hesitation. I knew, after all, that her grandfather had passed away only recently. And I was sure his death loomed large in her twenty-year-old life. But I also knew there were writing issues beyond her question about voice that I wanted her to consider. Namely, the "so what" I was always talking about in class, the need to make broader statements. I think I told her something like this: Your grandfather's death is a piece of evidence like an example or quotation. And, as in the case of evidence in any kind of writing, it needs to be directed and discerning. There needs to be a reason for its appearance. A reason that it has a place in your text beyond its importance in your

life. Evidence needs to push the argument forward; it should cause me, the reader, to be somewhere else when I am done. Right now I remain unmoved

We hung up. She revised.

I don't even remember anymore what her final version looked like. I am sure it looked like all the other essays produced by her classmates—extraordinary, once in a lifetime dramatic narratives of loss or love. What I began to realize with Hallie's paper is that while a personal narrative may grant authority for students that they might not realize in other forms of writing, it calls on them to tell certain stories and, more importantly, to tell them in a certain way. There is an implicit connection in the writing classroom between the form of the personal narrative and the content of the extraordinary. One only need to read a set of composition papers filled with accidents, death, loss, and love to see that students are well aware of this connection, even if their teacher is a bit more slow on the uptake.

Richard Miller begins his, now famous, essay "The Nervous System" as follows: "For his second attempt my father selected a set of kitchen knives, and, when he got to the garage a hammer from his toolbox." A story of his father's suicide attempt, it is one of the most powerful openings I have ever read...especially as the opening of an essay in an academic journal. It is nervy of him. A colleague of mine disagrees. He says it is "sensationalistic." Our differing reactions only proves the point of Miller's essay—that the "personal" and "academic" do not exist as a categories but are rather bound by context. What might seem too personal to one person may not be to another. It has to do with one's taste.

In discussing the personal narrative, Miller works from the assumption that there are certain narrative maps available to all of us—spun out by institutions and publicly held. We are all at great pains to tell the right story at the right time—to hook our stories into these master narratives. It is how we become members of a community. Students, like all of us, have become adept at locating and adopting these master narratives.

We are most comfortable when the stories being told fit into the mutually understood narrative. It is when a writer shows a vulnerability in writing that cannot be easily theorized or placed into a larger narrative that an audience does not know how to respond—what it is being asked to do. These are moments when personal writing feels too emotional, confessional, or self assuming. Miller argues that the response comes from the reception of the stories (the violation of taste) rather than the fact that stories are being told. It seems like a really important distinction to me because it leads to the ways experiences get counted in the classroom.

His conclusion (that some stories garner cultural capital in the classroom because they fit, or can easily be placed within, recognizable and acceptable master narratives while others do not) helps me think about why my student, Hallie, might choose to write about her grandfather's death. It is an acceptable story to tell. His conclusion also helps explain why most of the personal narratives I receive from my students are stories that I have seen a million times before—"home is where the heart is," "I was blind but now I see," "only in near death experiences do you learn the value of family," "long distance relationships will always fail." My students are savvy consumers—they know that telling the right kind of story is what really matters

Yet, this doesn't seem like enough to me. It explains why Hallie wants to tell the story of her grandfather's death. It is a story of loss. It is a well known story that has accrued a great deal of cultural capital. But it says nothing about my response to Hallie—a response that seems equally about master narratives and about the kinds of stories that matter in the academy. Miller seems most concerned with the content of personal narratives. I want to push the point further—think about form. What would Miller say, I wonder, in response to this story?

I am at a coffee shop sitting with Celia, a former student of mine. She has asked me to help her revise a personal narrative that has been assigned by my colleague Rona. The narrative is about "home" and Celia has done a beautiful job describing the conflicted feelings she has about her home in Cleveland and her home at the university. She had complicated these two homes with a story about her visit to her Jewish homeland of Israel. Celia concludes—not in so many words—that home is where your heart is. I have heard this story before. It is the kind of story, I think, you are talking about, the kind that has capital.

What interests me about Celia's paper is the way she briefly talks about the transition spaces between her homes (the drive from Cleveland to Ann Arbor, the flight between the U.S. and Israel) as being important spaces in which she consciously thinks about the idea of home. The invisibility of the ordinariness of being home normally does not require her to think about home while the being between them does. I push her to develop this idea of transition space as home.

A week later Rona calls me. Laughing, she says she can tell exactly where I have entered into Celia's paper and shows me. She is right. I would argue that Rona was able to

see my influence because the move I pushed Celia to make is an "academic" move. Being able to say why this story matters, producing a "so what" is a turn that we do in our own writing and that we want our students to do—and it is a turn that we reward. This does not mean that Celia's paper is not a "better" paper. It probably is—or at least will probably receive a higher grade. Nor does this mean that students do not need to learn to make these particular kinds of complicated moves in their writing and thinking. They do.

My point is how we mystify the "so what." By privileging the product of the "so what" and not the process, we deprive our students of an opportunity to examine the process all writers undertake when they write: the ordering that leads to the "so what." We fail to demonstrate that this "so what" is only one among a countless number of "whats." We find the "so what" so comforting that we institutionalize it. Several years ago at the University of Michigan, the "so what" had literally been institutionalized. It is the second attribute of student writing that merited exemption from introductory composition and, therefore, an attribute that should be found in all student writing before students left introductory composition. The criterion read that "student writing should effectively addresses the 'so what' question."

Part of our comfort, comes, I think from believing that a "so what" creates closure, a neat bow-tied ending. We are uncomfortable with stories that do not move in a specific direction, that fail to make a point, that prefer to float. We seem to feel that once we move our stories into the realm of the "so what" we no longer need to think about them. They are tied down. Safe, I guess. I imagine myself, as a teacher, running around the classroom and grabbing the strings of student stories that float in the air like giant red

balloons. With each one that I tie down another floats free. Soon my classroom is a field of fettered balloons.

But, I say to myself, at least I know what I have.

What would happen, I wonder, if we asked our students to consider more fully how they are making choices in their writing, how they are shutting down options on their way to the "so what"? The "so what" clinches the argument in an essay, closes the deal, ties the particular into a general statement of being—but its certainty is illusory, a reduction of all possibility into one moment or statement. Students need to be aware of the illusion such ordering represents. I am not proposing that students not reach the "so what," rather that they critically consider what has been ordered out in the act of reaching. For while, the "so what" indeed ties the story into the universal, the move does not create wholeness.

The work of the anthropologist, Ralph Cintron, never lets me forget that all writing is made. And that the process of writing is really a process of making—making a subject and making a text. When we choose words for the page it is at the exclusion of millions of other words, millions of other choices, directions, and possibilities. In this way, writing is also only partial. It can never tell the whole story. It can never account for all that makes it to the page as well as all that is necessarily left behind. The work of anthropologist Ralph Cintron never lets me forget that between the letters, between the words, between the lines exist enormous gaps and the razor sharp edges of all that is not said.

What can we do to make these gaps more apparent to students in what they read and in what they write? How can we help them to see how gaps are made and filled. All writing is a reduction of possibility. All writing fails to account for everything. All writing is a collection of gaps, wholes, and omissions. Some writing conceals these gaps more

deceptively than others. Professional writing, published writing, literary writing often appears seamless—even when it is fragmented. The work of the writer, the production of the text, the choices made, the loss of options is harder to see. Harder for students to see. Harder for students to produce.

Other texts, however, non-professional texts, texts crafted for use rather than for art, these texts can reveal the making of writing more clearly. Such writing, typically unseen and ignored is what I call ordinary writing. Notes left on the kitchen table, old check book registers, diaries, scrapbooks, can all be ordinary writing. Unlike literary or professional writing it is neither coherent, crafted, or whole. Like all writing, though, ordinary writing is made not begotten. And we can see the writer at work in the making if we take the time to read it.

The example of ordinary writing I am most familiar with, have learned to read most easily, is the diary of my great great great aunt Annie, a woman who homesteaded in the late 19th century. Annie's diary is ordinary writing because, as a diary, it would be typically ignored. It is boring, repetitive, endless, and without much context or plot. Those who read diaries prefer more literary diaries than a diary like Annie's. Yet it is an ideal site for seeing how writing is made because Annie is not crafting for aesthetic reception. Unlike a more literary-minded writer, her writing is the end, there is no other end. Lacking closure, her writing lays bare the choices a writer makes. and how a writer reduces possibility in writing, narrows the options, conceals the gaps.

Annie is engaged in keeping the unstable at bay, in ordering out anything that might destabilize her day. Students can examine the rhetorical and material features as evidence of making order, the hand of the ordering agent. They can

also see and name Annie's writing strategies: her use of margins, the reduction of her vocabulary, parataxis, and her refusal to occasion her writing. They can see and name the ways in which she is in control of her writing and the ways in which she is constrained. If taught, students can Annie a position as a complex writing subject whose text is equally complicated although seemingly plain. They can then consider how all writing—your writing, my writing, even that of a writer as skillful as Virginia Woolf—replicates the same kinds of moves Annie is making. How all texts reveal the faults of writing, the fact that making order means concealing the rest. Writers can then consider their own texts in light of Annie's work as maker—they can critically consider the possibilities being ordered out when choices are made to order in. The difference now being they have and can name the experience of producing these gaps on their own.

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